

TENNESSEE FOLKLORE SOCIETY BULLETIN

Contents

Signs and Superstitions	p. 1
Army Slang	p. 6
News Notes	p. 8
Recent Publications	p. 9
The Annual Meeting	p. 11
Notes and Comments	p. 13

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SIGNS AND SUPERSTITIONS

We in this modern day and time are prone to "make fun" of the various signs and superstitions of the people who have gone on before us. I have never felt that this was any outstanding sign of intelligence on our part. People have to believe in something, and often there is only a sign to guide them. The great Book of Books is full of such experiences. Was there not once a Star that guided the Wise Men? Do we not read such words as, "This shall be a sign unto you"? (Luke 2:12) We should at least be tolerant in all things, allowing those about us the same privilege we ourselves take. We believe what we choose to believe.

Since my earliest days I have heard many laugh at the idea of the "Moon Followers," and yet we admit that the moon controls the tides of the sea. Once upon a time someone said, "He who laughs last, laughs best." Probably the scoffers have not been aware that those who follow the moon have much careful research back of their beliefs. The relation between the moon and plant growth has an extensive bibliography. Steiner and a more recent book, The Moon and the Growth of Plants, have much careful research and thought back of the theories given. This book is published by the Anthroposophical Agricultural Foundation, Old Mill House, Brayon-Thames, England. It is the result of ten years' research, and it sells for five shillings. The conclusions are based on careful experiments with flowering plants, cereals, and vegetables; and they are likely to jar the complacency of the most sophisticated, so says A.H. Dailey of Crab Orchard, Tennessee. We learn from these experiments that all returns from plant culture have a direct relation to the sowing of seeds in the waxing period of the moon rather than in the waning period. It is claimed that two days before full moon is the correct time to do one's sowing. It is said by those who make a study of such interesting experiments that the proper signs to use are the signs of the moon's place in the zodiac, which is almost a whole sign different from the calculation furnished in the average almanac.

When our ancestors set about to build their homes in this new country, they were careful to lay the foundation when the moon was new so that it would not sink down in the ground too far but would stay up firm and just where it was placed. They were careful to notice the moon before they began to cover the house. This must be done in the dark of the moon so that the boards would lie flat and thus turn the water when it rained. If someone refused to abide by such rules and regulations, it is said that he was rewarded by the boards turning up at the ends, thereby allowing the house to leak. The boards were also more easily torn off by the winds.

The early settlers were not only cautious about the moon signs when building their homes and barns, but, when they went to lay their beautiful zig-zag rail fences, they were just as careful to "lay the worm," which was the bottom rail, when the

moon was "coming to a full," never afterwards. This was for the same reason given above for the laying of the foundations of the houses and barns.

When hog-killing time came in the autumn, the hogs were never butchered until the "sign was right," which was always after the moon was full. This was for the purpose of preventing the meat from being "spongy or puffy" as they termed it. It was lain on top of the various farm buildings the first night for the frost or cold air to cool it properly.

The farmers not only butchered their meat according to the signs, but they gave special attention to their hogs, cattle, sheep, and horses when the sign was in the "feet." All operations necessary to perform upon the stock were arranged for this particular time so that the loss of blood would be less than at other times.

Weaning calves, pigs, colts, etc. was supposed to be helped or hindered by the sign at the time of the process. Farmers endeavored to avoid weaning when the sign was in the heart, for this prevented the bawling and "carrying on" of the young.

All garden and flower seed were planted according to signs, as was also field grain. Seeds that bear above the ground required a different planting time from those that grow roots.

Corn planted when the sign was in the knees was crooked and dwarf-like. The proper time to plant corn was said to be when the dogwood blooms. Planted in the new of the moon it would grow tall. No one dared to burn the cobs of the seed corn if they believed in these signs. Some few farmers would not plant corn until the whippoorwill began its plaintive calling. Beans were always planted early in the morning on Good Friday. Cucumbers were planted before sun-up on the same day. A woman is supposed to plant the cucumbers and a man the turnips. If one planted the latter on the 25th of July, he would have turnips, be it wet or dry. Watermelons were always planted when the apple trees were in bloom. A man was supposed always to plant the watermelons, wearing only his shirt. Cabbage went into the ground when the sign was in the head; carrots and radishes, when the sign was in the arms. To have nice, red, juicy beets they were planted when the sign was in the heart, which was also thought to make them tender - "tender as the heart." Potatoes planted when the sign was in the feet would grow many small nubs for toes. Potatoes were most often planted in the dark of the moon, and dug in the new of the moon. One had to be careful not to plant when the sign was in the blossom, for then they would "bloom themselves to death."

Superstitions are many and varied. Two of the most interesting groups are those dealing with fertility and those involving the cure of disease.

The fact that Indian women planted and raised the crops has a significance that reaches far back into the lore of ages long since passed. Because of their ability to reproduce the race,

it was thought that crops would grow better for them than for the men.

Stones were thought to possess some power of fertilization. For that reason rocks were often piled in the forks of fruit trees that did not bear well. Sometimes they were tied to the limbs to bring about a heavy yield of fruit. An expectant mother was often requested to walk through the orchards and to touch the trees.

Nearly every ailment had an old folk remedy, and many of them are in use today. There are hundreds of such remedies known to our people. I shall give only the most commonly "practiced" ones that I have known about. To cure earache, use polecat grease, rattlesnake oil, castor oil or sweet oil, a few drops in the ear; place cotton in next, and then heat corn meal and put it in a small bag directly under the ear on a pillow. For toothache, place alum on the tooth until it can be extracted. For asthma, drink sassafras tea, smoke life-everlasting, or boil it and drink the tea.

Mrs. Lula Wood gave me the following superstition about asthma. Stand by a tree and cut into the bark the exact height you measure on the tree, and when you outgrow the mark asthma will leave. Some claimed that when the mark grew up the asthma would be cured. Another belief was that if you would bore a hole in a tree and take a lock of your hair out of the crown of your head and place it in the hole, securely plugging the hole afterwards, the disease would be cured.

Some other superstitions which are familiar follow. To stop nose-bleeding hold hands high over head, and have someone wet the back of your neck with cold water. For a bruise wash in vinegar, bind with brown paper as Jack did when he fell down and broke his crown. For a bad cold, drink burned whiskey; put a flannel cloth on the chest after greasing it with tallow and sprinkling it with equal parts of a mixture made of turpentine, lamp oil and camphor; take a hot foot-bath; and go to bed. For frostbite on the feet place them in a basin of water and slowly add wood ashes. To cure hiccoughs take nine sips of water, no more, no less. To cure the itch get poke root and boil it, and in the water in which it was boiled take a bath. For rheumatism boil wild-cherry bark and drink the tea. If this fails, make pokeberry wine and drink it. For bad sores that will not heal let a dog lick them. For insect stings use tobacco juice. To remove warts use milkweed juice. To ward off chiggers rub your shoes and stockings and the bottom part of your clothes with pennyroyal.

Children were often fed candy, in which had been boiled the seed of the Jerusalem oak. This was for "worms." It tasted bitter. Prickly-ash roots boiled and made into tea was for colds. Ground-ivy tea was for hives in babies. New-born babies were often given a long strip of fat meat to suck to ward off

disease.

Calamus root was carried by almost everyone and eaten at intervals for "heart-burn." It was also good for kidney trouble. Wintergreen dried and pulverized was mixed in the feed for horses. It gave them an appetite.

Rattle-weed was boiled and made into a poultice for hurts on horses.

Slippery-elm bark, the inside bark, was boiled and made into poultices for boils on people.

Golden-seal was eaten for sore mouth.

Blackberry root tea was used for "bowel ailment."

For snake-bite, especially copper-head snake, catch a toad-frog, and while it is still alive "jerk it in two" and place over the wound. It will draw the poison out quickly. If this is impossible, cover the wound with salt.

The remainder of the signs and superstitions here listed are of a miscellaneous nature.

If you want your baby chicks to live, throw the egg shells over the housetop.

If a rooster crows just after dark, it is a sign someone is going out of the family.

If a rooster crows on the steps, someone is coming to visit.

If a redbird flies in front of you to the right, you will see your sweetheart before night.

If a rooster stands in the doorway and crows facing the door, someone you love is coming to see you. If he faces the other way, someone you love is going to die.

The flying over of the wild geese indicates a change in weather.

If they are headed south, it will be colder, if north, it will be warmer.

When the rain-crow calls, it is a sign of rain that never fails.

If a screech-owl screeches near the house at night, it is a sign of death; also if a bird flies into the house.

A white Christmas; a green Easter. A green Christmas means a white Easter.

A late Easter; and early spring: an early Easter; a late spring.

Whatever you do on the first day of the year, you will do all year long.

Eat clay peas on New Year's Day.

If you wash clothes on New Year's Day, you will wash someone out of the family.

If a woman comes to see you on New Year's Day, the chickens will all be pullets; if a man comes, they will all be roosters.

Have a good dinner on New Year's Day, and you will have one every day in the year.

A dark Christmas, a fat graveyard.

When walking along with another, do not allow anyone to pass between you.

If you meet a black cat, it is bad luck; also if you go under a ladder.

If you step over a person who is alive, you will step over the grave of that one.

If you start anywhere and meet a woman first, you had better return and make the journey another day.
To walk with one shoe off and one on, you will have as many lies told on you as you take steps.

If your nose itches on the right side, a man is coming. If it itches on the left side, a woman is coming.
If your ears burn, someone is talking about you. If the right ear only itches, you will hear something bad. If it is the left ear, something good.
If your hands itch, you will get money; if your right hand itches, you will shake hands with someone you have never seen.

Marry in white, you have chosen right.
Marry in black, you will wish yourself back.
Marry in green, you'll be ashamed to be seen.
Marry in red, you'll wish yourself dead.
Marry in brown, you will live in town.
Marry in gray, he will never get away.
Marry in blue, he will always be true.

Place the pulleybone of a chicken over the doorway after you have pulled it with someone around the table leg; whoever gets the short piece will marry first, and the one who first comes in at the door will be the "victim."
Never take a hoe or an axe into the house. It will bring death to the family.
Never move a broom unless you take it first and throw it into the house.
If you drop your disncloth, a hungry person is coming to see you.
If no food is left on the table from an evening meal, it is an indication that the next day will be a fair one.
Always leave a house from the same door you entered it.
Red-pepper pods in the oil of the lamp will keep the lamp from smoking.

If your bees swam in May, they are worth a load of hay; in June, a silver spoon.
But if they swarm in July, they are not worth a fly; just let 'em die.

If you have bad dreams, put the Bible under your pillow.
To dream of a white horse indicates death. To dream of a black horse indicates a wedding.

If you see the new moon over your left shoulder for the first time, you will have good luck. If your hands are full, you will have them full all month.
If you happen to see a star falling, whatever was on your mind at the moment will come true.
The number of stars seen in the circle about the moon indicates the number of days until it will rain.

A whistling woman and a crowing hen always comes to some bad end. The hen that crows is killed immediately. A whistling woman will have a baby before she has a husband.

Red in the morning, shepherd's warning, meaning it will rain or be bad weather.

Red at night, shepherd's delight, meaning the weather will be good.

If rain falls while the sun is shining, it will rain the same time tomorrow.

The fogs of October indicate the number of snows in winter.

When the thunder comes in spring, it is a sign that winter is over.

Observe carefully the color of a measuring worm that gets on you, and you will get a new dress or suit of clothes that exact color.

If two people happen to say the same word or sentence at one and the same time, if they make a wish, it will come true.

A white moth or butterfly is a sign of death.

Mix asafoetida with your fish bait and fish will bite better.

To settle "sick stomach" take a peach-tree limb, scrape it downward, meaning toward the root of the tree, boil the scraped bark, and drink the water.

When children misbehaved they were often switched with a peach-tree switch, and it was termed administering peach tree tea.

Their mischief could generally be controlled completely by the mere suggestion from the parent.

Ruth W. O'Dell

ARMY SLANG

(Editor's note - A few months ago there arrived at this office a letter with an APO postmark and the stamp of a United States Army examiner. The letter was from Private Joseph Nicholas who wanted to subscribe to the Bulletin. After the Hoosier Folklore Bulletin published a most amusing list of G.I. terms, we wrote Private Nicholas to see if he could supply us with a similar list. He could and did. The accompanying letter said,

"If you can use these, let me know, and I can send you hundreds more off and on. Words are different in the different branches of the service and also in the places where service men are stationed. For instance, here [the Hawaiian Islands] they call themselves the 'Pine-apple Army,' which wouldn't apply anywhere else. Also they call the infantry 'Gravel Crunchers,' and that wouldn't apply to any other branch. New words seem to creep into the G.I. vocabulary every day to make the supply inexhaustible.")

Terms for Food

1. Angel cake and wine - bread and water in confinement
2. Armored cow - milk
3. Army chicken - beans and frankfurters
4. Army strawberries - prunes

5. Baby food - cereal
6. Baltimore steak - liver
7. Battery acid - coffee; also called bootleg, blanko water, jamoke, ink, black out, blackstrap, tar water, solvent, boiler compound, and paint remover.
8. Bean gun - rolling kitchen
9. Bean shooter - civilian dietitian at post
10. Belly acre - chow hall
11. Bossy in the nude - raw hamburger
12. Bossy with a blanket - hamburger with a slice of onion
13. Brain food - noodle soup
14. Cackle jelly - eggs
15. Canned Willie - corned beef hash
16. Cannon ball - grapefruit
17. Cat beer - milk
18. Crash - omelet
19. Cream on a shingle - creamed chipped beef on toast; also called S.O.S.
20. Crow - chicken; also called buzzard or albatross
21. Dog-fat - butter; also called salve, Marfak, and cow grease
22. Eyes wide open - fried eggs, sunny side up
23. Fish eyes - tapioca with raisins
24. Funeral pie - raisin pie
25. G.I. lemonade - water
26. Georgia ice cream - hominy grits
27. Goldfish - canned salmon
28. Gun the potatoes - pass the potatoes
29. Half gone - hungry
30. Hand grenade - pineapple ring
31. Hay - sauerkraut
32. Irish grapes - potatoes
33. Kennel rations - meat loaf, or hash
34. Lighthouses - salt and pepper shakers
35. Lot's wife - salt
36. Lumber - tooth picks
37. Lunch nooks - fingers
38. Moo juice - cream
39. North Dakota rice - hot cereal
40. Pipeline - spaghetti

Terms for Personnel

1. Bean eater - bottom rookie
2. Bubble dancer - dishwasher; also pearl diver and china clipper
3. Bunion breeders - infantry; also paddle feet, camel corps, and foot sloggers
4. Buzzers - Signal Corps
5. Chair warmer - company clerk; also cluck, jerk, and company stooge
6. Chicken - young recruit
7. Chow hound - big eater
8. Colonel - over-zealous non-com
9. Cosmo lines - artillery
10. Dirt bag - soldier on garbage detail

11. Dog - affectionate term for cavalry man's horse
12. Dog robber - officer's orderly
13. Dogface - soldier; also John Dogface (similar to "Yank" and "Sammy" of World War I)
14. Dolly Dancer - soldier on office duty who caters to officers
15. Driftee - draftee; also yearling
16. Eagle walker - colonel's orderly
17. Feather merchant - civilian worker on army cantonment
18. Gertrude - soldier on office duty
19. G.I. brats - officers' children
20. G.I. Jesus - affectionate term for a chaplain; also Devil Dodger, and Holy Joe.
21. Glamor boy - selective service man, also handcuff volunteers
22. G-man - garbage man
23. Goon - stupid soldier; also zombie
24. Grubber - lowest rank in Army; one grade lower than the yard bird
25. Grunts - electrician's helper in the Signal Corps
26. Guardhouse lawyer - guy who gives bad advice
27. High-pay private - first class private
28. Hollywood private - acting corporal
29. Hoosier - fellow who joins up for fear he might inherit the farm
30. Icicle - draftee; a drip caught in the draft
31. Kangaroo - sergeant of the guard
32. Khakiwacks - soldiers
33. Latrine sergeant - enlisted man who takes it upon himself to issue orders
34. Little wolf - corporal
35. Mitt flopper - yes-man; caters to officers
36. Moth balls - recruits
37. Muscles - physical director
38. Nappy - company barber

Private Joseph Nicholas

NEWS NOTES

Ray Wood of Raywood, Texas, author of Mother Goose of the Ozarks and other collections of folklore, is compiling a new volume of tales and verses at Memphis. He will do his own illustrating and musical scoring.

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Boyce House, Fort Worth, Texas, columnist, has just published a new volume, Tall Tales from Texas. It is published by the Naylor Company of San Antonio.

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Projected for Spring, 1945, publication is Paul Flowers' Greenhouse Yearbook, a compilation of material which has appeared in the daily column, "The Greenhouse," in The Commercial Appeal, Memphis. Emphasis will be on folklore, particularly versions familiar in the Mid-South, West Tennessee, North Mississippi, Western Arkansas, Southern Kentucky, Northwest Alabama, and Southeast Missouri.

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RECENT PUBLICATIONS

A TREASURY OF AMERICAN FOLK LORE by B.A. Botkin, 932 pp.; New York (932 Fourth Avenue); Crown Publishers, \$3.00.

Since its appearance in the spring of 1944, this ambitious collection of American folk lore has made its way to the best-seller list, as reported in Publishers' Weekly compilation of sales by 78 booksellers throughout the United States.

Professor Botkin, president of the American Folklore Society and assistant in charge of the Archive of American Folksong in the Library of Congress, has amassed a striking volume of material, much of it published before, but, so far as this reviewer is aware, never before so well organized or nearly so comprehensive.

For the Tennessee and Southern folklorist it has particular appeal, containing as it does a reasonable amount of material on David Crockett and songs from the eastern mountain regions; it even pays full respects to Casey Jones.

It runs the gamut from pioneer tales, through the "Little Audrey" hilarities, to the more modern, if transient, "Knock, Knock" hysteria. It is more than a book to read; it

justifies its title of "Treasury." Part I gives the back-woods boasters, from Crockett to Mike Fink; pseudo bad men, such as the Pike County Rip-Tail Roarer; killers such as Wild Bill Hickok, Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Quantrell, Sam Bass, and Stackalee, with ballads; then come the free lances, such as Roy Bean, Buffalo Bill and Big-Foot Wallace; later, the miracle men, Pecos Bill, Old Stormalong, Bowleg Bill, Paul Bunyan, John Henry, Febold Feboldson, Casey Jones and our favorite contemporary, Popeye; later, the patron saints, Parson Weems' tale about Washington, the legends about Lincoln and Applesced John.

Part II contains booster and knocker tall talk, chiefly the very plausible narratives for which the sky was the limit, and then local cracks and slams, gentle and not-so-gentle digs by sundry ethnocentrics at folks who live on the other side of the river or across the continent. Part III consists of pranks and jests, a catalog of the practical jokes so precious to the perpetrators and so devastating to the victims, and a welter of jests and anecdotes. Part IV is devoted to liars. Animal tales, including selections from Uncle Remus, go into Part V. Part VI contains play songs and rhymes and catch colloquies, together with an ambitious collection of ballads and songs.

"The people or the folk of the present hour that is and of the future that is to be, many and many of them are seen here in their toil, laughter and struggle, are heard and made known in part in the heaped-up and sprawling materials of this book. It breathes of the human diversity of these United States," says Carl Sandburg in his foreword.

There are omissions, such as the "Ballad of Bonnie and Clyde," but nothing between two covers can be all-inclusive. The "Treasury" deserves a place on the shelves of every folklorist.

Paul Flowers

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THE ANNUAL MEETING

The annual meeting of the Tennessee Folklore Society was held Saturday, October 28, at George B. Peabody College, in Nashville. This was the first meeting of the group in two years, for last year the meeting was cancelled because of the transportation situation.

The following program was presented.

1. The Ballads and the Humanities - Dr. Charles S. Pendleton

Dr. Pendleton, speaking informally, defined the humanities as the qualities that brute creatures do not possess, although these need not necessarily be limited to spiritual or mental qualities. He next discussed to what extent these humanistic qualities were recognized by both the upper classes and the common people, quoting examples from literature to illustrate both. The ballads were cited as examples of humanistic literature springing from the lower classes. He closed by asking whether, in studying the humanities, it is not somewhat one-sided to study only the expressions of the trained mind.

2. Folk Dances and Games - Mrs. Flora L. McDowell

This paper will appear in a subsequent issue of the Bulletin.

3. Why Does American Folk Music Spread so Slowly? -
Dr. George Pullen Jackson

This paper will appear in a subsequent issue of the Bulletin.

4. Is Uncle Remus Dead? The Disappearance of the Negro Folk Character - Dr. Susan B. Riley

Dr. Riley traced the various treatments of the negro

in literature: the influence of Rousseau, which idealized him as a primitive type; the use of the negro as a background for abolitionist propaganda in America between the Revolutionary and the Civil wars; the highly stylized negro character that developed with the rise of minstrelsy; the increased artistry in handling the negro character after the Civil War; the more modern treatments of Paul Green, DuBose Heyward, Marc Connelly, and others. She closed by outlining several possibilities for the future portrayal of the negro in literature as judged by contemporary trends, all of which treat the negro as a real person, not a "folk" character.

5. Where Is the Folklore of the Tennessee River? -
Donald Davidson

Speaking informally, Mr. Davidson spoke of his work in preparing the volume on the Tennessee for the "Rivers of America" series. The Tennessee is rich in the two things that ordinarily give rise to stories and legends about a river, (a) natural barriers and hazards to navigation, and (b) a wealth of historical incident that took place along its banks. The fact is, however, that there is very little folklore about the Tennessee and very little mention of it in ballads, stories, and so on. Mr. Davidson lays this to the fact that the railways came so early in this part of the country, allowing the cities to turn their backs on the river.

6. Madrigals and Folk Hymns - The Peabody Madrigalians

Matona, Lovely Maiden
Wondrous Love
Garden Hymn

Orlando di Lasso
Folk-hymns, arr. by
Annabel Morris Buchanan

I Have a Mother in the
Heavens
The Promised Land
Charlottown

Songs and Spirituals
arr. by Charles F. Bryan

7. From Song to Symphony - Charles F. Bryan

This paper will appear in a subsequent issue of the Bulletin. Mr. Bryan illustrated his paper with recordings of actual folk-singers and of his own "White Spirituals" Symphony.

At the business meeting of the society Mrs. Flora McDowell was elected president, and Mr. Farr and Miss Horne were re-elected to their offices of Treasurer and Secretary-Editor. The Society also voted to issue reprints of Volume III, copies of which are needed to fill orders for library files, and to help Dr. Hunter in his work with the American

Dialect Society (see Notes and Comments).

Luncheon was served in the Peabody Cafeteria.

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NOTES AND COMMENTS

The leading article in this issue is taken from a proposed "History of Cocke County," by Mrs. Ruth O'Dell of Newport. Mrs. O'Dell is a member of the League of American Pen Women, the National Order of Women Legislators, and the Tennessee Women's Press and Authors Club. She has been a member of TFS for several years. This is her first formal contribution, although she has given us things for NOTES AND COMMENTS several times. We welcome her to these pages.

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The following were sent to us by Mr. C. L. Wood of Columbus, Mississippi:

Lawyer to negro witness on the stand:

"You remember very well things that happened way back yonder, don't you?"

"Oh, yessir, I members better backards than I does forwards."

One negro to another: "Deacon Jones was convicted of Deuteronomy with another man's wife!"

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Miss Elizabeth Jackson was discussing the servant problem with a friend in Maryville. The friend, speaking of the maid who had just left her, said, "She was so snooty she wouldn't even work in a pie factory!"

When Miss Jackson asked for an explanation of this expression the friend laughed and said she guessed that it meant that person would quit work if the flavor of the pies was changed. Miss Jackson through subsequent inquiries found that this was a common expression around Maryville for a person who was extremely hard to please.

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Dr. Edwin Hunter of Maryville College is serving as Chairman for Tennessee of the American Dialect Society's proverb collection, and he has asked the aid of the Society in this task of collection. Members are urged to list material on 3x5 cards, each proverb on a separate card, being sure to give the source of each proverb. He suggests the following as samples:

1. Complete statements

Good fences make good neighbors.

2. Rimed Wisdom

Early to bed and early to rise
Makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.

3. Wellerisms

Everyone to his own taste, as the old woman said
when she kissed the cow.

4. Modern versions of old proverbs

A ring on the finger is worth two on the phone.

5. Proverbial comparisons

Direct - Black as night
Reversed - Clean as mud
Elaborated - Happy as a nigger on election day
and it going Democratic

6. Proverbial legendary or story figures

Job's turkey

7. Variants

Knee high to a duck
Knee high to a grasshopper

8. Sentence fragments

Till the cows come home